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Damn Legs: A Memoir

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Damn Legs: A Memoir

By

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Introduction

As an infantryman who served with the US Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom, I am writing a memoir, about my experiences in Samarra, Iraq. “Damn Legs: A Memoir” is intended to be a book-length piece upon completion. However, for this Capstone Project only selected chapters are being presented. Although this book is a personal narrative, it is not just my story that I am telling. It is also the story of the bond of brotherhood that formed between me and some of the men in my platoon as we fought during 2005 in the Sunni Triangle. “Leg” is a derogatory term applied to infantrymen since we walk everywhere and carry everything. The term Leg implies that we are strong, but not smart. Written in first person, “Damn Legs” will have a reflective tone as it will be an examination of my growth as a man, warrior, father, and citizen, and the resulting effects the War had on us infantrymen, our families, and the Iraqi people.

I have chosen to use flash backs rather than write a straight chronological sequence, so the story begins in Kuwait and flashes back to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I have highlighted how the attacks affected me, and my resulting actions. I wanted this to reflect the inner challenges I faced going into the military, as well as the sense of duty or calling that had such a profound impact on my life.

I saw my fellow MAPW students writing about what they believed in, what they had endured, who they were, and it was then that I knew I had to write about Iraq. I began writing about Iraq while taking PRWR 7900 Writing the Biography and in PRWR 7500 Advanced Fiction Writing. While writing fiction stories about Iraq, it became apparent

that I could not write any more fiction until I had written this memoir. I have heard that a writer can't write anything, until he tells his own story and this true in my case.

I felt my service in the military and Iraq qualified me to write this book. In the MAPW we learned many things about the craft of writing, but most importantly we learned to write what we know, and this is what I know. Every writing course I have taken has in one way or another focused on story, and this story needs to be told, not just for my sanity, but also in order for my craft to evolve. As a writer, no other subject has touched my life like Iraq. When I was in undergraduate school, I felt I did not have anything to say, that I was inexperienced in life. Iraq changed that. I have something to say.

"Damn Legs" is the untold story of some of the hardest working and least thanked soldiers in the military. Americans need to hear what we infantrymen fought for and what the war means to us. We did not have the luxury of debate; we only had the task of service. I served with men like Pisey Tan who after fighting in Iraq in 2003 was stop-lossed. He was forced to extend his service and ordered to return to Iraq in 2005 where he would have both his legs blown off while we were on a patrol in Samarra. I have spent a good deal of time with Tan since then, and he has never whined or complained about losing his legs. He is a man of uncompromising integrity, service, and honor.

Tan was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and his parents immigrated to America from Cambodia after surviving the Killing Fields during the Vietnam War. However, being a working class family in the inner-city left the Tans at a disadvantage to compete against the influences of drugs, gangs, and crime on their two boys. After facing the fact that his life was not going anywhere, Pisey Tan enlisted in the US Army, the

same Army that had caused his family so much heartache and loss during the Vietnam War.

I am as close, if not closer, to these men as I am some of my own family. I know these men better than my own cousins. After sleeping with eight of these men in a small room for a year, I can identify anyone of them by how they snore. I can tell who Brophy is by how he walks in the pitch black darkness of a night-time mission. These men have a sense of character about them that could be described as strong or successful. It is important that this book not have a tone of "whining or complaining." I hope this work can be seen as explaining rather than complaining. "Damn Legs" will be an intimate portrayal of the men who fought in Samarra, Iraq. The value would only be minimized if this work became an anti-war piece full of self-pity, and that is not the intent of this piece. I do not intent to sugar coat or gloss over the truth of what happened, but I do aim to paint an accurate portrayal of what happened.

The media has not reported the war in Iraq accurately. When I was home from my deployment on "Rest and Relaxation," I remember watching the war footage on CNN, and thinking, "This is not the war I am fighting in." Very little news coverage that I have seen has come close to accurately portraying the battlefield. The complexities of the battlefield in Iraq are so intense that it is impossible to capture the essence of the war in a single news report. And there are so many issues to account for that the media cannot possibly convey the nature of the conflict in short reports, blogs, or articles. The war requires a thorough examination from all viewpoints, and that cannot be achieved in a thirty second sound bite.

Anyone interested in hearing a soldier's story about Operation Iraqi Freedom will find "Damn Legs" a rich tale of survival during a high-intensity conflict. The target audience could include both military aficionados and anti-war activists alike since it is a memoir and offers first hand experience of what happened. Reflections on the war will make this a story of the human condition, rather than an argumentative piece for or against war.

Our bond of brotherhood grew out of our life and death experiences. We survived daily attacks that included mortars, rocket propelled grenades, small arms fire, improvised explosive devices, landmines, grenades, and suicide bombers. Although some of us were far from honorable when we entered the service, we squarely met the challenge of what was asked of us—albeit as ridiculous as it seemed at the time.

Our tour in combat can be reduced to one word—frustration. Trying to understand our situation was an exercise in futility, or so it seemed. We faced difficult challenges on every possible level: the temperature made the environment inhospitable, the enemy was invisible and illusive, and our character was tested every day as we faced high levels of combat stress. Some of the men were able to zone out and try not to think about the difficulties of fighting an enemy without a uniform, but I had considerable difficulty wrapping my mind around the conflict. Our mission was as futile as attempting to hunt a ghost. The insurgents could blow a bomb as our vehicles drove by and sit down and drink a cup of tea, and we could never tell which one it was. They all looked the same. They didn't wear uniforms. Many of us entered Iraq believing we were the great Western hope for the poor, mislead Iraqis, but by the time we left, many of us had nothing but hatred for them, and vice versa.

There will be scenes that focus on our unit's leadership during the War. These chapters will contrast the duties that the enlisted men had in relation to the officers that gave the orders. Although the officers were not some of the closest men I will be writing about, how they lead affected our squad, so I will write about leaders at various levels because we were ultimately responsible for whatever tasks, however futile, they ordered us to complete. Furthermore, their leadership style, or lack thereof had a great affect on our moral, so that issue will be addressed too. I will also focus on the internal struggles I had with other Non-commissioned Officer's lack of leadership.

With few books being written by soldiers, "Damn Legs" will fill the niche of soldier written histories about the war. Several soldier written books have been published since the war. The scope of these books varies from first person blogs without a good story line to unit histories well written with good story. In comparison, "Damn Legs" will differ from some of the books about Iraq by offering a reflective voice of the past that has been separated from war for two years—enough time to re-assimilate to society and overcome the weird period of readjustment to American society. As I have read my journal entries during my deployment, I have found them lacking literary elements. By themselves, my journal entries do not warrant publication. My reflection on those writings is what deserves the dedication to revise, revise, revise, and then publish. Some soldiers have published books about Iraq that have a tenor of whining and complaining. It is my intent to avoid that trap by focusing on voice, story, structure, and tangible details, rather than flying off on an emotional rant.

Some of the other books about the Iraq War have been successful, but "Damn Legs" will differ from these in that it is a memoir with a structured story. *The Fighting*

69th: One Remarkable National Guard Unit's Journey from Ground Zero to Baghdad by Sean Michael Flynn is a well written book about the New York National Guard unit that helped secure the World Trade Center after the 9-11 attacks. *The Fighting 69th* later went to serve in Iraq during 2004 and 2005. This book offers a historical survey of the unit's past failures and current accomplishments. The scope of *The Fighting 69th* focuses on the time period from 2001 to 2005. By focusing on the lives of a few soldiers, Damn Legs will differ from *The Fighting 69th* by focusing on the impact of serving in OIF III in Samarra, Iraq during 2005. *The Fighting 69th* is a unit history, not a personal narrative with biographical portraits. Flynn has written a great book of military history, but it is not memoir.

My War: Killing Time in Iraq by Colby Buzzell is another book written by an Army soldier that is a personal narrative; however, *My War* a book that reads like a compilation of Blog entries or personal journal entries, and it fails to have a structured story. Although a funny book with lots of personal anecdotes about being the Army, *My War* fails to paint a big picture, does not follow a theme, and fails to have a progressive story line. "Damn Legs" is a creative non-fiction book incorporating autobiographical elements, personal narrative, well-structured story line, and a commanding voice of personal reflection. Books are being published about the Iraq war, and there is a healthy market for new material, especially well written material with a structured story and a fresh voice.

To complete this story, several more chapters need to be written. These chapters could cover the following topics: family, interpersonal struggles, suicide attacks, counter-terrorism, and a conclusion. My personal inventory of my divorce with Barbara after I

returned from Iraq was a painful lesson in denial. I tried to avoid the fact that I wasn't 100% percent committed to the marriage, even as I said, "I do." My relationship with my teammate, Cox, during the deployment was a continual source of bitterness on top of an already difficult situation. I judged other soldiers on their performance and leadership, and it often came at the expense of personal inner peace. There are several other significant episodes that warrant examination like the day we were attacked by suicide bombers with two trucks loaded with explosives. As frustrating as our deployment was, we made progress in stabilizing Samarra. Today, the citizens have returned to Samarra and life is resuming in what appeared to be a ghost town on many days as the violence peaked in 2005.

Writing "Damn Legs" has been a challenging experience, but a rewarding experience. Reliving the horrors of war is not an easy task, and keeping the motivation up to keep writing has been a challenge. As a writer, working through the revision process has tremendously helped improve this piece, but revision too can be daunting. My voice has been the greatest strength of the work. By focusing on the challenges of story arc, structure, grammar, and the theme of relationships, I have been able to polish the work. For the readers sake, I have removed as much jargon and acronyms as possible to make it a more reader friendly work for the civilians, which will help its overall strength as well. Removing most of the acronyms has had an effect on the voice and military tone, but it will improve readability for non-military personnel. As the memoir tends to jump time and space, I have attempted to ground the reader with as much time and space indicators as possible. I have also incorporated more visible imagery and have tried to bring the

tangible experience to the reader in graphic descriptions. Most importantly, I have tried to avoid summaries and ground the story in details that "show, rather than tell."

"Damn Legs" will offer a variety of readers a first hand account of the challenges we faced in Iraq. As a continuation in the long line of war memoir, it will offer a reflective account of the horrors of war, the lasting physical and emotional impacts on both sides, the price we paid, and hopefully a better understanding of our painful past. If we don't learn from the past, we are doomed to repeat it. This is a journey through personal reflection to come to terms with the past, and any reader can relate to this universal theme.

Kuwait

We marched onto the chartered civilian airplane at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia and flew to Shannon, Ireland where we had a short layover before our final leg to Kuwait. The flight took about eighteen hours. Upon take-off, the plane became quiet. It was spooky how quiet the plane was. Every seat was full. We all had our weapons. Flying with a rifle was a new experience. There were machine guns laying everywhere. We all had our laptops or portable DVD players in our carry on bags. Some guys stayed awake. I popped a couple of Tylenol PM's and went to sleep.

When we landed in Kuwait, we were herded onto a civilian chartered bus that drove us to Camp Victory in Kuwait that was a "tent city" in the middle of the desert. As I looked out the window, there was nothing for miles and miles but sand and the occasional nomadic band of Arabs. The bus had red velour seats that were much more comfortable than the airliner seats. The bus driver was a third country national. I don't know which government contractor hired the oppressed worker of the day, but it wasn't comforting being driven to war in a chartered bus that was driven by a Muslim. Kuwait is a barren wasteland. Being raised in Georgia, I was used to lots of green. There was no green in Kuwait. Everything in Kuwait was brown like the color of sand. The beige color of sand highlighted everything including our uniforms, tents, and vehicles.

We found our tents, got a cot, and went to the chow hall, which was awesome. The food was better in Kuwait than it was at Ft Stewart. I'm not entirely sure it was strictly a funding issue either. After my dealing with our cooks at Ft. Benning and Ft. Stewart, I'm not so sure they had the wherewithal to figure out that fresh produce could

make a better meal with a little bit more labor than the canned shit they slopped on our plates.

One of our first tasks was to connect with our unit and check in so we could start receiving combat hazard pay. We were deployed early to get the vehicles and set up the battalion's preliminary logistics of getting all 10,000 of the 3rd Infantry Division's vehicles off the boats and staged at Camp Victory. After we connected with the rest of the men that would join us for the "Port Detail," we mobilized to the port at Arifjan, Kuwait.

While riding the bus down to Arifjan, the bus driver played Haji music. It shocked me that they listen to a form of dance music that had techno influences. That was all they played. Every time we heard the locals play music it was the same type of Middle-Eastern-techno. I couldn't understand how a traditional culture listens to progressive music. We had a redneck NCO that couldn't stand the Haji music, so he made the driver turn it off. The driver was just a symbol of a deeper, more glaring problem of the military relying on third country nationals to do a good bit of the workload. We arrived at the camp at the port. It was another tent city, but this one was located in an industrial complex with a chow hall and a phone center. It was a small post, but we were secure from the rest of the city while we were in our tent city.

There was an amazing view of the Persian Gulf from our camp. The port was littered with industrial complexes. I was amazed at the view of the complex web of pipes from the petroleum refineries. There was a cement kiln as well. The cement manufacturer had to import sand to make concrete because the sand in Kuwait was unsuitable because

it was too fine. It was ironic to be surrounded by nothing but sand for hundreds of miles, and they still imported more sand for cement manufacturing.

We had to drive the vehicles off the boat and into the secure yard where third country nationals would load the vehicles onto tractor trailers driven by, yet more third country nationals to Camp Victory where our brigade was staging for our mobilization to Samarra. After we finished off-loading our vehicles, we had to stage another division's vehicles to be loaded on the boat. The boat came in to Kuwait full of vehicles, and they went back to the States full.

I was on the day shift. We worked twelve-hour shifts from six am to six pm and vice versa. I felt for the night shift because it was cold at night. It wasn't that it was brutally cold. Low temperatures were in the 40's and 50's at night. It sucked to be outside for twelve hours. Military cold is much worse than civilian cold. Civilians can go inside and warm up. The military keeps going no matter what the temperature is, so if you have night shift in the cold, you will freeze your balls off.

The food was great at Arifjan. I don't know who the overpaid subcontractor was that was awarded the Dining Facility (D-FAC) contract, but they did a good job. I knew some of the war contracts were controversial, but there were days that getting a decent meal really made a difference because there were so many days we ate Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's). If we got a chance to eat a good meal or some fresh produce, it was like paradise.

It was a learning experience driving vehicles off the ship. We were only supposed to drive vehicles we were licensed to drive, but the detail would have never been completed if we followed that rule, nor would it have been much fun. I drove a bunch of

vehicles that I wasn't licensed to drive. I drove my first M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier with laterals. Most of the M-113's have steering wheels now, but occasionally you will still see one of the older models with joysticks. It didn't have a steering wheel, but instead had two joysticks sticking out of the floorboard. It didn't have gas or brake pedals either. The joysticks operated the gas and brakes. It was a small track vehicle that was quick, had really good brakes, and had been in use since Vietnam. You could push the right joystick forward and the left joystick reverse and pivot steer, or just spin in a perfect circle.

The ship's main deck was stacked full of cargo containers like an ocean-going freightliner. The ship had about five or six decks on it, so we had to drive the vehicles up and down the ramps to get off the boat. The ramps were steep, and gravity would pull the vehicle downward pretty quick. There were ground guides at the bottom of every ramp that gave you the signal when to stop and go or slow down. Ground guides were people assigned to monitor and control the traffic in dangerous locations. I was driving a M-113 down the ramp, and gravity pulled it quick. I was hauling ass. The ground guide gave me an expressive "slow the fuck down" hand signal. I barely tapped the breaks, and the M-113 locked up immediately. The M-113 will stop on a dime. That little joker stopped, and the buoy, the flotation device on the front of the vehicle, flipped open, broke off the vehicle, and slid down the ramp. It almost hit the ground guide. I made eye contact with the ground guide and she said, "What the fuck?" I apologized and threw my hands in the air to signal, "Sorry." I stopped the vehicle, jumped out, and threw the broken buoy on top of the M-113, and took off. I don't know who's M-113 it was, but when they received their vehicle, they must have thought, "What in the hell happened to our vehicle?"

I was in the dining facility eating and talking about all of the cool shit I got to drive that day with Mike. I told Mike the story about the broken buoy flying down the ramp. Mike and I went to basic training together. We both got stationed at Ft. Stewart, but we were in different units, so we rarely saw each other. Earlier that day, I was caught at a red light when I was hauling ass down the main road by the petroleum refinery. I hit the brakes and the ass end of that M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier jacked way up in the air. Mike was approaching the intersection from the opposite direction, and he almost fell out of the driver's seat laughing when he saw my vehicle stop. As we were eating dinner at the same table, it was easy to laugh at all the ridiculous events like that rather than focus on the fact that we shipped over two weeks earlier that the rest of the unit.

We sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic getting the vehicles off the boat. The vehicle fumes suck. I hated sitting inside the Bradley when the engine compartment panels would rattle off and fill up the driver's compartment with fumes. It took me months to get used to the stench of diesel fumes. I am convinced if I ever get cancer, it won't be from the Marlboros or marijuana I smoked in the 80's. It will be from the Bradley diesel fumes or depleted uranium from the High Explosive (HE) and Armor Piercing (AP) rounds we fired in Samarra.

I was sitting in traffic on the boat in a M-113, and a dude rear ended me with a Bradley. After my neck jerked back, I turned around to see what idiot just hit me, and this dude flipped me a bird. I laughed my ass off. I had seen it all—bumper cars on a Navy ship in the Persian Gulf with combat vehicles. It was one of the first lessons I look back on where we had to learn to laugh at ourselves when we could during the monotony of combat, otherwise we would just go insane and freak out.

Kuwait was a dreary desert in January. It was gray skies and cold. It rained occasionally. That was the last time I would see rain for many months. I had been in the Middle East for a few weeks and was getting acclimated to the environment. After we finished the boat detail, we went back to Camp Victory where we hooked up with the rest of our Battalion. It was good to see the guys. We were all processed into Kuwait, so we were getting combat pay. I was getting used to having sand in everything.

I was wearing contact lenses most of the time. The wind was brutal in Kuwait, and we were in the middle of the desert, so there was nothing to stop the sand from getting in everything. I hated wearing glasses while on duty. Glasses invariably get in the way, or they get wet or fogged up. I was cleaning my contact lenses in the latrine, and thought I dropped one, but I couldn't find it, so I must have dropped it. But I hadn't dropped it; it had fallen under my eyelid, so I put another contact lens in. A week later I pulled a wad of eye snot out of my eyeball that was surrounding my lost contact lens. It was gross. I finally gave up and just left them in permanently, and only cleaned them when I couldn't hack it any further. The Army offers corrective vision, but it is hard to get that surgery from the Army due to the Special Forces getting priority. I wanted it, but our Non-Commissioned Officers couldn't help us figure out how to get that benefit.

After we finished the Port Detail and returned to Camp Victory, we went to the shooting range. The range was an impromptu facility out in the middle of the desert where we stood up a bunch of paper targets on plywood and 2X4 lumber. We zeroed our weapons. We sighted them in so we could shoot accurately and hit the bull's-eye. I had improved drastically on my marksmanship with the help of a pair of contact lenses and a red dot scope that allowed me to shoot with both eyes open. When we qualified at the

shooting range before we deployed, I finally shot Expert marksmanship. Everything in the Army is about “training” or preparing for battle. Going “Over There” was a process. Kuwait was the first step into the battlefield. All of the training had been academic to this point, now it was time for real world experience in battle.

On the Job Training

After our brigade staged all of our vehicles at Camp Victory, we were issued our ammunition and prepared to mobilize from Kuwait to Samarra, Iraq. All of the track vehicles were loaded on flatbed trailers, so we rode in our Bradley on the back of a trailer. We had to keep the battery charged so we could keep power for the turret to scan for enemy attacks along the way. In order to keep the battery charged, I would have to start the engine and run the Bradley for about 15 minutes every hour, otherwise we would lose power and have to get jump started by another vehicle. For two days I sat in the driver's compartment and started the vehicle every hour to charge the battery. Cox and Dubiel were in the turret scanning for enemy activity.

Alpha and Bravo Companies in 3rd Battalion, 69th (3/69) Armor Regiment were the two Infantry Companies responsible for the urban security of Samarra, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom (III) 2005. We were stationed at patrol Base Uvanni. During our first month in the city, we were also supported by an Armor company, but they were sent to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Brassfield-Mora to pull security on the Main Supply Route (MSR), also known as Tampa. The big guns on the Abrams tanks were too much for our presence in the city. The sound of a shotgun blast is loud enough to scare anyone inside a house. The boom from an Abrams round will scare everybody in the city. The Abram's big guns and powerful thermal sights were put to better use on Tampa where they could watch the flies on a camel's ass from 3000 meters away.

Patrol Base Uvanni was the symbol of everything the Iraqis hated about the United States. It was a big building that was draped in camouflage netting. It was Iraqi property that we confiscated. It was the Iraqi peoples school—the citizens of Samarra's

property. The most glaring symbol of American presence was the motor pool in front of the patrol base. We always called our parking lots the "motor pool." Our Bradleys, M 113 Armored Personnel Carriers, Light Medium Tactical Vehicles' (LMTV truck), 5 Ton Trucks, and HUMVEE's were parked out in front of the school. Our motor pool was the symbol of American might. Our mighty vehicles were symbolic of everything that Samarra despised—Western Influence.

Samarra was our sector, and we were in charge of the security for it. It was a unique situation for Iraq. We maintained our security on our piece of real estate. So we were ultimately responsible if a bomb got buried, and they did get buried. In that respect we were luckier than most soldiers in Iraq that traveled across turf that somebody else was responsible for. We owned our real estate. So we didn't have to trust anyone else, which also meant that we were responsible, if we did hit a roadside bomb.

The rest of the Battalion was stationed on the Main Supply Route (MSR) outside the city at FOB Brassfield-Mora. 3/69 was an Armor Battalion, so we carried the Armor Guidon, or flag. Our company was previously in 2nd battalion, 7th Infantry Battalion. The Army had recently undergone a restructuring of the Combat units, so that instead of being a Battalion of only Infantry companies, now the battalions were combat action units that could operate independently because they had a couple of infantry companies, a couple of armor companies, an engineer company, and a support company. The new units had everything from cooks, medics, finance, artillery, scouts, infantry, armor, and most importantly mechanics to keep the hundreds of vehicles operating.

I was an E-4 Specialist in rank and a Bradley driver in 1st Platoon, Alpha Company (a.k.a. the Outlaws). First Lieutenant (1LT) Adam Hurley was our platoon

leader. A recent West Point graduate, Hurley arrived at our company and took command of our platoon in August 2004—about 5 months before we deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Probably since the Army's conception, benign class warfare has existed between the enlisted men and the commissioned officers. I was exploring the option to go to Officer Candidate School and get a commission and make the military a career. I thought about it long and hard.

Some enlisted men might say that West Pointers are pricks. Some might say they don't know chicken shit from chicken salad, but we couldn't say that about Hurley. Reflecting back on our deployment in Iraq, I have to say we were lucky to have 1LT Hurley as our platoon leader. We could have done a lot worse. There were many days I resented him for being so motivated. He was always volunteering us for missions. Hurley had to be in the middle of the shit—wherever or whenever. If we only had 3 hours of sleep; it doesn't matter—mount-up, we're rolling out again. "The Sir" might not have been so gung-ho if he had to do all the Bradley maintenance we were pulling, but that wasn't his job. He didn't have to turn wrenches and load ammo and supplies for the mission. But it was easy to resent him and the other sergeants that didn't have to hump it like we did.

I don't know where exactly they taught, "lead form the front" at West Point, but Hurley took that philosophy to heart. He never backed down from a fight, or any chance to get out into the sewage stinking city of Samarra. There was something that went beyond leadership in Hurley that made him different from the other Officers I have seen in my Army career. I don't think it could be characterized as easily as "Protestant work ethic," which would still have to apply to Catholics like Hurley and me. He cared about

what he did. He cared more than just doing a good job because we all did a good job, but he did it without complaining.

In retrospect, I know I was wrong to resent him because he really did a great job. But there were times when it was just too much. Exhaustion kicked my ass. We worked around 18 to 20 hours a day for the first two months we were in Samarra. Resenting the Lieutenant seemed like the most logical thing. Someone had to be the bad guy, so why not the figure of authority. If I had it to do over, I would try to be more like Hurley. He never showed one sign of complaint. Hurley wanted every mission. He was an aggressive leader.

Joe Kircher, a gear-head from Gary, Indiana, was Hurley's Bradley driver. Kircher was the smartest man in our platoon. He had a natural capacity to figure mechanical things out. He could repair anything. It wasn't long into our deployment in Samarra before the sand had made Kircher's X-Box inoperable. Kircher disassembled the X-Box and repaired it. Kircher had great taste in porn and an endless supply of porno magazines. I could always go to Kircher, Reeves, and Tan to get help figuring out how to fix something on my Bradley. Before going into the military, I had never changed the oil in my Honda Civic. By August 2005, with the help of our mechanics, I had put 5 transmissions in my Bradley.

Learning how to keep all our equipment operating, especially the X-Box, wasn't the only learning curve we had to encounter. Wrapping my mind around "fighting an insurgency" was like trying to prove God existed—virtually impossible. Some of our guys just zoned out and shut down when we got back from missions. I was continually frustrated with not being able to figure it out. How can I fight or even defend against

suicide bombers, of which we met plenty in Samarra? Our missions ended every day, but the frustration never did. It was hard to see the daily success in our missions, but ultimately we were successful militarily. Underneath every breath was a low-lying, energy of frustration. I don't know how Hurley was able to never complain during our year in Iraq, but he did not complain, or at least we never saw him complain. He was so gung-ho. He did his job and then some. I don't think that West Point taught the kind of leadership Hurley had. He had something else, a different brand of leadership.

1LT Adam Hurley was on a mission on the outskirts of Samarra when he heard the radio transmission, "There is no one here. I can't find anybody." Hurley's Bradley Fighting Vehicle was providing security for an Army Engineer mission, so he couldn't do anything but listen. The engineers were building a burm around the city as a part of population control. The voice over the radio was one of Charlie Company's men, reporting immediately after one of its patrols ran over a bomb. Charlie Company had been patrolling on the outskirts of Samarra, Iraq, when one of their HUMVEE's ran over a buried Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The Humvee vaporized instantly. The only consolation for the soldiers was that it hit so hard and so fast that they didn't feel any pain. There were no body parts to recover. The bomb was so big (probably a five-hundred pound bomb) that it vaporized the entire body of the HUMVEE. Hurley wasn't able to volunteer us for a support mission that day, but he had his ear to the radio listening anyway.

Hurley was listening to the Company radio when he heard that transmission. There was nothing he could do this time. He listened to Company and Battalion radios even when he wasn't on a mission. He was always listening and waiting for a mission to

come up that our platoon, 1st Platoon, could respond to as a Quick Reaction Force. I remember seeing what was left of the HUMVEE at Forward Operating Base Brassfield-Mora. The chassis was the only thing left of the scorched vehicle—just the engine and frame, nothing else left—no seats, no turret, no steering wheel, absolutely nothing left.

There were countless days when we would be chilling in our room between missions and we would get the call, "Mount up. 2nd or 3rd Platoon is making contact (with the enemy). We have to go back them up." My first thought was always, "Fuck Sir. Can't we get a break just for one minute?" Those breaks never came in 2005. There was always another bomb, mortar, rocket attack, or firefight that we had to get in the middle of. Lieutenant Hurley was always listening to the radio, and when anybody anywhere needed help, 1st Platoon rolled out because our Lieutenant listened to Company and Battalion radio like it was his iPod. He believed in the mission.

We could have had a shit-bag that was a sorry leader for a platoon leader, but we didn't. We had Hurley, and even though it sucked going through it, now I know that he was right. I got resentments. Everybody got resentments. It was hard not to get pissed when we pulled a 12-hour combat mission, did 4 hours of maintenance on the Bradley, did whatever shit-burning details our platoon had for the day, and then got volunteered to go help somebody else that just got their asses blown off when we should have been getting our shut-eye. If we got a call that someone needed help, we stopped what we were doing, got all our guys, loaded up with our weapons and gear, and rolled out into the city. We had plenty of calls for help, and we in turn relied on them too.

Driving on dirt roads was the worst. It was impossible to see where the bombs were buried. I once ran over a landmine on a dirt road in Samarra in my Bradley, so I

knew that bombs and landmines were virtually impossible to see in dirt. A landmine will fuck-up a HUMVEE, but a Bradley can survive a single landmine, especially if it is only one landmine. If the landmines are double stacked, they can be trouble for a Bradley and fatal for a HUMVEE. I was able to see the ones on asphalt sometimes, but even then my chance of finding them before they found me was precarious at best. One of our daily missions was "Route Clearance." We drove the city streets of Samarra at day break in an effort to find all of the new roadside bombs that we planted the night before. It was a daily task. We had to creep at a painfully slow pace to find the bombs. We had marginal success on Route Clearance missions.

Since Samarra was under a nighttime curfew during 2005, the city streets were deserted except for those burying bombs. There were at least half a dozen landmines and bombs that I ran over that year that did not explode. There is ordnance buried all over Iraq. Landmines and artillery shells are buried in every neighborhood in Samarra. They are buried in the same streets the children play. Once we found them, we had to wait for Explosive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) to come blow it up, which could take up to three hours, which was more time that we had to spend out there as a target.

The Bradley Fighting Vehicle is an armored personnel carrier that the Infantry uses in the Army. It weighs about 75,000 lb with a full combat load. The Bradley is a track vehicle, similar to a tank, but smaller. The tracks dig up the earth when it turns, and it seemed like every time I turned on a dirt road, I kicked up an IED, landmine, or artillery shells. I would get the call from Sergeant First Class (SFC) Foreman that I just kicked up another round.

"Hey Buzz. Stop. You just kicked up another artillery round," he would say, and my heart would start pounding.

"Roger that," I said, and then we would have to wait for the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team to come and blow the bomb up in place with their little robot.

Hurley's Bradley, the A 1-1 track, hit the first IED our platoon hit that year, so he knew the consequences of our missions. Although their Bradley and personnel were not injured, Hurley got a face full of Iraqi sand since he was the track commander and had his head sticking out of the top of the turret. Our platoon saw how leaders could lead from the front or lead from the rear. We had some shit-bag sergeants that would use their rank to get out of missions, but Hurley never would. He went out every time. I don't know what happened at West Point to Hurley. I don't think West Point is a factory for bad-ass leaders, and the lacrosse team Hurley played on at West Point wasn't a champion team, but Hurley had something special about him that distinguished him from all the other officers I've served under. The military academies send out their fair share of mediocrity just like every other university.

Hurley had all the necessary ingredients to be a successful Infantry leader. He had character, dedication, commitment, enthusiasm, intelligence, and courage. He exceeded all the benchmarks in those areas, but he was the most motivated soldier, and that was his greatest strength. Most importantly, Hurley had the one allusive ingredient to being a successful leader—the opportunity to lead during combat. The tour in Iraq was a defining moment. I learned from him what is required to be a strong leader, even though I couldn't see it during the deployment. He was a strong leader on day one of our deployment. I

could not say the same for myself. I had learned a lot about leadership in basic training and at our unit, but we got a chance to see who could walk the walk in Iraq.

Dog Faced Soldiers

When I was at Ft Benning at basic training, the 3rd Infantry Division was in Iraq. They were the first unit to reach Baghdad. They marched their Bradleys all the way from Kuwait to Baghdad in 3 weeks during Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was caught up in the new sense of nationalism that Fox News branded. I believed that what we were doing was justified. We needed to get those weapons of mass destruction. We needed to get revenge for 9-11.

I arrived at Ft. Stewart, home of the 3rd Infantry Division, at the end of August 2003 just after the 3rd ID had returned from their deployment to Iraq. The majority of men were on Block Leave, which is when a unit takes leave simultaneously, so the post was practically abandoned except for the Rear Detachment to which I was recently assigned. While the 3rd ID was deployed, a handful of soldiers stayed on Rear Detachment (Rear D) to maintain the post. Rear D was comprised mostly of new soldiers to the unit that did not deploy due to bad timing or injured soldiers that returned home that weren't too injured.

Rear D was my first impression of being in the Army. We showed up at 0900 and tried to leave by 0930, unless we got picked for a detail like cutting the grass or "Area Beautification." It was a cakewalk. There wasn't shit to do because the guys had painted everything and cleaned the entire post, so we chilled at the barracks playing video games or watching movies. As the men returned to Ft. Stewart after leave, we started having real formations every morning with accountability. The First Sergeant gave the Company Commander the attendance report every day.

I was assigned to 1st Platoon, 2nd battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment. Staff Sergeant Wisner was my squad leader and Corporal Bailey was my team leader. I met all the other guys in the platoon. I was a new Specialist (E-4) in the unit. Specialists have E-4 pay grade and are the rank just below Sergeant. Most of the "Joes" in our platoon were E-4's as well. Joe is slang for Enlisted soldier in the Army, meaning they had not made the rank of Sergeant. These guys had been to combat, and I had been to basic training. We had the same rank, but they had experience. They were a team. They had spent the greater part of a year together training for and deploying to combat. They had been in the shit. Many of them had confirmed kills. All of them had endured endless amounts of bullshit. They quickly and fondly referred to me as "Cherry."

Some of the cool guys that were giving me a hard time about being a cherry quickly took me under their wings. They taught me the ropes. Most of the guys wanted education in my unit. I had education, so we had a common point. There were the guys that all they wanted to do was party, but I didn't hang out with them since I didn't party for the sake of getting fucked up anymore. I was put in Staff Sergeant (SSG) Wisner's dismount squad. The mechanized infantry platoon is organized my mounted and dismount squads. There is one mounted squad per platoon that includes alpha and bravo sections, and two dismount squads (1st and 2nd squad) that each include alpha and bravo teams. The mounted crews are responsible for maintaining and operating the Bradley Fighting Vehicles. A mounted crew consists of Driver, Gunner, and Bradley Commander. The dismount squads are responsible for ground operations and carry small arms like rifles and machine guns.

SSG Wisner was probably the coolest squad leader in the Army. He was tall and had a deep voice. Wisner was up front with us when he said in his deep voice, "Men, I have the easiest job in the Army. I have a squad full of E-4's. I have two team leaders that do everything. Be where you are supposed to be, don't get in any trouble, and we are cool."

He treated us with respect. He wasn't immature and abusive with his rank like many of the shitbag Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO's) that littered the Army ranks at Ft. Stewart. He knew how to lead by example, which was an uncommon leadership characteristic in our unit. All we had to do was do our jobs, and stay out of trouble and we could have the best squad in the Army. Unfortunately, the Army is fluid. People are always coming and going, so units never stay the same for very long. A lot of the guys in our squad were getting out of the Army, and they were motivated to get out after their deployment to Iraq. They knew 3rd ID was going back, and they didn't want any more of it. Those of us that hadn't been were chomping at the bit to go.

The team mentality is ingrained deep into the Army raison d'être. Wisner took us for a run during PT one morning. We had a couple of guys that sucked at running, and they were about to ETS, which is Expected Time of Separation, so they weren't putting out any effort. They fell out of the run. They couldn't keep pace. Wisner got pissed off. He kept all of us out there doing a slow ass run that we should have knocked out in 45 minutes, but because these guys were dragging their asses, Wisner kept us out there for almost 3 hours doing an Airborne Shuffle on the dirt roads of Ft Stewart. The Airborne Shuffle is a slow paced run, more like a shuffle that eventually hurts because you are not running. Wisner taught us to stay together and stay alive. It was a shitty lesson that was

repeated over and over again in the military; the common good is our goal in everything. Just like in basic training when our entire platoon was getting smoked because Alexander couldn't tie his shoes, SSG Wisner made a point to hold the team accountable for the weakest link. This mentality was supposed to build a solid team, and it worked most of the time, but not without resentment forming in the ranks. I began to despise Private First Class Siacca because he couldn't run.

I was keeping in touch with Barbara on a daily basis. She was amused at how slack the Army was during my first few weeks at my unit. We met on weekends for adventures. Sometimes she would come to Savannah and we would stay in a Bed and Breakfast, or I would go back home and stay with her at her townhouse. Since the 3rd ID had just returned from Iraq, we took 3 or 4-day weekends almost every weekend in the Fall of 2003.

Sergeant Bailey was my team leader. Bailey was from Louisiana and had a natural gift for getting away with murder. He could sham out of every bullshit task, and if he ever got tagged for a detail, he was the Sergeant, so he didn't have to do anything. Bailey mastered the fine art of getting things done in the Army. There is one principle that enables people to get things done in the Army more than any other principle, and that principle is: it is better to beg forgiveness than ask for permission. Bailey would just get a truck when we needed a truck. He wouldn't go through all the bullshit protocol of signing out the truck from the company. Bailey just went to the motor pool and drove the Light Medium Tactical Vehicle (LMTV) back to the range to get us unstuck. In that sense, he was a very effective team leader, but if we were to follow military procedure, he would

utterly fail if he were ever caught, but since he never got caught for anything, it was a moot point.

My relationship with Barbara was progressing. We were connecting on many levels. We had several interests that we shared like riding bicycles, hiking, running, and working out, yoga, movies, and discussing spiritual stuff. She was very supportive of my relationship with Tyler. She was a good role model for him too. We shared many good memories as we explored the world in our current circumstances the best we could. We met almost every weekend, and it was painful on the weekends I had duty and was unable to meet her. Whether we went camping at nearby Tybee Island or I went back to Kennesaw, we had a great time together.

My first roommate in the Army was Bennett who was fucking the shit out of the Nubian Princess on a regular basis. The Nubian was "Barracks Ho" that would make her rounds through the barracks. Bennett was her current piece of steady. Bennett was a heavy drinker that didn't seem to fully embrace the Army policy of "Area Beautification," routine cleaning and grounds maintenance. Our bunks were divided by entertainments centers, so there wasn't any real privacy. After a long night of drinking, Bennett woke me up as he staggered in and pissed all over the bathroom floor. Not a single drop made it into the toilet. Bennett passed out. Taking a shower the next morning was a chore.

The infantry can be divided into two camps: smart guys or dumbasses. "Retard" was the most common word in the infantry, closely followed by Hooah. It didn't matter if someone was in either camp. What mattered was if they put out or not. A soldier could be a complete moron, but if he showed up and put out a strong effort, he would be worth his

weight in gold. There were plenty of guys that never scratched the surface of trying to achieve their potential. We were always looking for guys that could show up, and if he had a cool personality, then he was a wet dream for any infantry squad. There were plenty of dicks in the Army. They were easy to spot. You could see them strutting their rank around post like a big cock on a leash.

1st Platoon had its share of retards. We had guys kicked out for dope, or busted down for DUI's, but their was a core of nerds that kept 1st Platoon flying just under the radar, which was a great place to be—getting it done without attracting too much attention. Smitty, Reeves, West, Kircher, Jones, Brophy, Tan, and the Cherry each brought a skill set or knowledge base to the platoon that would come in handy at one time or another during our deployment.

Ryan Smith, *Smitty*, was an ex-Ranger that loved to read American history and current affairs. He had served with the 3rd Ranger Battalion before being shipped to 3rd ID and becoming a Damn Leg—the equivalent of a Samurai being ordered to fall on his sword. Rumor was that Smitty's Ranger Squad leader didn't like him (Smitty wouldn't be his designated driver), so he was sold down the river to the Big Army where he would become a regular Joe, *a Goddamn Damn Leg* as Smitty used to call us. Smitty was one of the cool guys that became one of my best friends, and he was always impersonating other soldiers.

Lucas Reeves, the *Bumpkin*, was from Arkansas and had a slow, Southern accent, but was intuitive with all things mechanical. *Reevesy Boy,* as Smitty used to call him, made a great driver since he was mechanically inclined. The mechanics loved it when they had Bradley drivers that knew how to turn a wrench. Reeves also had the stuff to

make a great NCO: motivation, knowledge, love of the Army, and most importantly common sense. Reeves and Smitty were Staff Sergeant Nicholson's crew for Bradley A-13. They were a good pair because Smitty, even though he could recite the Declaration of Independence, couldn't tell the difference between an impact wrench and a monkey wrench, so Reeves was able to keep the track running. Smitty was able to tolerate Nicholson's "lead from the rear" leadership style.

Joe Kircher, aka *Hetero Joe* or *Grandpappy*, was Sergeant Jones' driver. Jones and Kircher spent so much time together in their first rotation to Iraq that Kircher had grown truly disgusted with Jones. A hatred this deep rarely can be traced to a single event, but it was true that Jones and Kircher got lost in a sandstorm in OIF I, and Kircher blamed Jones for that, and everything else too. When Kircher got stop-lossed and sent back to Iraq to be Jones' driver, it seemed as if fate had a particularly bitter destiny for Kircher to accept. Several of the guys were stop-lossed, which meant that they had served their time, but the fine print in the contract said the Army could keep them on Duty for additional time if needed.

These guys were cool. We would become brothers. I would later go on to be able to recognize them from 50 meters by their walk on night patrols.

I had been picked, like everybody else in the Army, for my fair share of details. I had been in SSG Baucom's squad as a 240 gunner. Baucom gave me up when his squad had to give up a driver. He had relished the fact of his ability to give a college graduate the shittiest jobs in the infantry. He had worked his way up the ranks from Private, and he would be damned before he would let a college graduate not pay their dues just like he did. We all have to pull our weight in the Army, and no one is above anyone else in that

regard—there is a rank structure for a good reason, but everybody should carry their own bags, and pull their share of shitty gigs. Baucom got off on being able to give the Cherry up. So, off to driver school I went. I wound up at SSG DuBiel's driver. SGT Cox was our gunner.

I met Pisey Tan when I joined the mounted squad. Tan was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents immigrated to the United States from Cambodia after surviving the Killing Fields during the Vietnam War. Tan has a mellow disposition but a great sense of humor, which is required to survive the infantry because you have to be able to laugh at some of the ridiculous stuff we endured, or you will go insane. Tan was one of the guys that went to Iraq. He was nick named the "Asian Beast" because he had a temper that would flare up, if he was pushed too far. The guys gave him a hard time because he locked-and-loaded on Staff Sergeant Foreman while they were in Iraq. Tan loaded his weapon and pointed it at Foreman in an out-of-control moment when they were pushed to the max. Things like this can happen in combat. Soldiers can snap. Tan was reprimanded at the platoon level, so he didn't get a Court Martial. But he earned the "Asian Beast" reputation. Tan was mechanically gifted. He could repair vehicles, which is a gift I never had and would quickly need in my new role as Bradley Driver.

Tan and I were on the Rail Load detail at Ft. Stewart, which was the detail where we loaded our vehicles onto the train that took our vehicles to Savannah where they were loaded onto the boat. Tan had the unfortunate luck to be picked for rail load detail for OIF I and III, so he knew the routine. It was my first rail load detail, so I looked to him for guidance, but half-heartedly. I had been in enough shitty deals to know that they all suck, but you just have to suck it up and get through it. In my first year at Ft. Stewart, I

had developed my own sarcastic, dark sense of humor about the Army, which meant that I would try to sham out where possible like every other Joe in the Army. Since many of our guys were stop-lossed, there was plenty of bitterness to get absorbed into in our platoon. With the dip-shit leadership style of many of our NCO's, it was easy to see that there were plenty of reasons to be disgruntled in the Infantry.

There were some details that just sucked beyond imagine in the Army. For me, Kitchen Patrol (KP) was the absolute worst. The Army cooks (egg flippers) were seen by the Infantry as the scourge of the Army—sitting around in the rear with the gear and the beer, which is to a large extent true. Most of the Battalions had to give up guys for KP, which pissed me off because they never came to the line to help us pull security. So we helped them, but they rarely helped us. Apparently, lugging cases of number 10 cans around was too much for them to handle, so they called the Infantry. In fact, in Samarra, they wouldn't even bring us a plate of food without a full Bradley escort through the city, so every time they brought us a case of Gatorade, we had to go to the edge of the city to get their dumbasses.

The majority of a Joe's Army career can be spent doing details. A lot of lower level enlisted men, myself included, get out of the Army before their careers can even begin, because the details suck. The Division Sergeant Major has his daily crew of post police details, which is area beautification. We would put on orange vests like community service parolees and walk around post and pick up all the litter. We cut grass. We painted buildings. We picked up brass and ammo. We swept the motor pool, and we cleaned the barracks even if we didn't live in them. We got pimped out by our own NCO's to go do someone else's dirty work. So we didn't go to a job that we signed up for

and just do that job everyday. We did everything and anything under the sun that the Army needed to get done.

The rail load detail had a sense of notoriety because it was a big detail that took several days, so naturally the expert sham artists were running for the hills. A detail that could be pulled off in a couple of hours was a delight. As soon as we knew it was going to be days, dread set in. The purpose of the rail load was to get our vehicles on the train, which was the first step in their voyage to the dusty streets of Iraq where many off them would be blown to smithereens. We packed our vehicles full of platoon shit: TV's, X-Boxes, DVD's, porno magazines, foot lockers full of personal shit, duffle bags stuffed with extra uniforms, and whatever we could think of that we would need to get us through the next year of hell. Every vehicle in the Division was packed full of shit.

The primary reason we were supposed to take the bus to the rail load was for security. Additionally, they knew Joe would sleep in his car, or just leave. The Army knew Joe would try to smuggle his personal shit over there, so security was tight on the rail load to minimize such a risk. Some guys in the platoon were like, "Fuck it. Drive down there and try to leave." That would have been a wet dream, but I didn't have the balls to pull that off. I saw some dudes get away with it. We pulled the extra weight. Some Joes got busted for trying to bolt, and they got a little extra love. After they got the balls smoked off, they got an Article 15 from the company for disobeying an order. Nothing too bad, but enough to make them look like idiots in front off the Company.

"Buzz, we can't drive to the rail load detail. We have to take the bus. It will be at the D-FAC (Dining Facility) at 9. We all roll out together, and we all come back together," Tan said.

"Ok Tan. We can catch the bus. No problem," I said.

We arrived at the D-FAC and there was one bus. There wasn't enough room for all of us, so guys started walking towards the rail yard.

"Fuck that dude! Do you know how far that is? It's the turn around point for the 2 mile run," I said.

"What are we going to do? The bus isn't coming back. I'm not driving to the rail load. No way. You can't drive. They will fuck you up, if they catch you," Tan said.

"Well fuck walking Tan. I'm not walking all the way down there. Come on. We can drive down there and hopefully we can bolt," I said.

"You gonna drive?" Tan asked.

"Yeah, fuck it. I'm not walking all the way down there for God's sake."

"I'll ride with you, but I'm not driving," he said.

"OK. Come on. Let's go."

We pulled off on the side of the road next to the other 50 cars parked in the sandy, South Georgia Bermuda grass that we had been rolling around in for the past year and parked. We put on our black Berets and walked in the gate of the rail yard where thousands of desert tan vehicles were lined up neatly. We hopped out of my little red civic.

"See, no sweat dude. Look at all these cars Tan."

"I don't know Buzz. We aren't supposed to drive. Guys got busted last year."

"Well they will have to bust a lot of people. There are a shitload of POV's (Personally Owned Vehicles) here," I said as I looked down the rows of cars and trucks.

There were M-1 Abrams tanks, our Bradleys, artillery tracks, M-113 personnel carriers, Deuce and a ½'s, 5 Ton trucks, HETT's, tractor trailers, Engineer vehicles, HUMVEE's, medic vehicles, and M-88's lined up perfectly in the huge parking lot. The vehicles were parked tight with each bumper inches from the next vehicle.

We formed up for a safety briefing. We were told that we were not allowed to leave. MRE's would be provided for lunch. We were not to put any personal belongings into the vehicles, nor were we allowed to take anything with us from the vehicles. We were to drive only the vehicles that we were licensed to drive. We were told most importantly not to walk in between the vehicles so we don't get squeezed between two vehicles accidentally. We were only allowed to walk down the rows of vehicles. The temptation to cut across rows was going to be too great not to break that rule.

We were turned loose to get the vehicle loaded on the flat bed train cars. The rail cars were narrow, so we had ground guides on every rail car that would guide us. The Bradley, Abrams, and other track vehicles were wider than the rail cars, sot the track was hanging off on both sides. It was my first time driving under such conditions. It was stressful at first, but I warmed up after a couple or rounds. I started driving anything that I could climb into. I wasn't licensed on half of the equipment. It was exciting to jump into a vehicle and figure out how to start it and drive it onto the train. Tan helped me figure out a couple of emergency parking breaks. Every vehicle had a parking break, but figuring out how to operate those parking breaks took some time.

I was officially a driver. If it had wheels, I was in it. It was cool. There were some guys that would only drive HUMVEE's or whatever they were licensed on. They were following orders. They also weren't taking any chances, or helping us get out of there any

faster. The detail lasted all day. It was about dark when we formed up for the release formation. Only we weren't released. We had to clean the parking lot, which was huge. There were little black pieces of rubber from all of the track vehicles, cigarette butts, and whatever else fell out of the vehicles, so we had to go hands across the world to clean the parking lot. When we finished it, we had to go back again, and again, and again. Then we got lectured about all the cars that were parked on the road when we were instructed to take the bus. So we got scuffed up for that bullshit.

Everyone that didn't drive was allowed to get on the bus and leave. I should have jumped on that fucker, but didn't have the balls to risk getting caught. So we stayed in formation long enough to get the point that we shouldn't have driven. We were finally released. Tan was right again. He had a way of towing the line. He would get on my nerves in Iraq with all the extra maintenance he would pull on the Bradley's. All I wanted to do was zone out, but he would actually get out there and get the maintenance done. My attitude was worse than his. I was pessimistic that it would invariably break down again, or something else would wear out, so what was the use as long as it was running. The Bradley would continually break down no matter how much maintenance you put into, so what is the point on trying to perform regular Performance Maintenance Checks and Services (PMCS)?

Drivers

Being a "Driver" was every Infantryman's worst nightmare. It meant having to put in extra hours for vehicle maintenance, missing out on ground operations, and worst of all it meant being stuck in the "Hell Hole." The driver's compartment in the Bradley is cramped and sits next to the engine that generates a lot of heat and noise.

To keep the Bradleys rolling, there was always a fluid to be topped off, track to be changed, road wheels to be changed, shocks to be changed, hydraulic systems repaired. Tan pissed me off several times when he prematurely started doing maintenance that I thought we could postpone for a few more days. If our platoon sergeant saw Tan doing something on his track, he would be asking why Bussard wasn't out there too, so I had to toe the line to keep up with Tan even though I didn't want to. I saw the inevitability of the Bradley breaking down everyday regardless of the amount of maintenance I performed, so I lost motivation to go the extra mile.

Being ordered to be a Bradley driver was the equivalent of a death sentence for an infantryman. As infantrymen, we had enlisted in the most dangerous position with a lust for the danger of carrying a weapon in combat. Being a driver meant sitting in the vehicle while the dismounts went on all the ground assault missions. At the beginning of the deployment, it was seen as the safest place to be. However, after several drivers were killed and seriously injured, it was the most dangerous position to be in.

I had my first experience running over a landmine in March. But August sucked. The brutal monotony of the war had fully set in and I had to fight the enemy within—complacency, which I am sure has killed more soldiers than the enemy has, although indirectly. It had fully set in. I was victim to its punishing wrath—nothing was more

important than getting out of Iraq. Our missions rambled into one long mission that never ceased to end. I was burnt out. We had been changing track in the motor pool constantly because all the miles we were logging on the Brad's had taken their tolls on the vehicles. Our Platoon had 4 Bradleys, but we were usually running with only three at any given time. I went through 5 transmissions during our 2005 deployment. At $95,000 a pop, a transmission was an expensive piece of the equation. They broke down all the time, and because they were breaking down all the time we, the Bradley crews were in the motor pool doing maintenance all the time, while the much luckier dismount infantrymen were in their rooms watching DVD's and on the phone talking to their girls back home. While we were in the motor pool, we were wearing all of our gear including helmets and flak vest because we were receiving incoming mortars on a daily basis. Just walking from our room to the vehicle without dying was a success. The mortars heightened the level of stress of everyone to the max, but the mechanics and Bradley crews were outside for hours at a time working on the vehicles, so it was an additional level of stress that compounded with the 125 degree heat made the deployment a pressure cooker.

Being mounted sucked. We had the thankless jobs of working on the Cold War vehicles that were dropping our guys into the fight. Bradleys weren't designed to run this many miles. My speedometer not odometer worked, so there was no way to track mileage. We spent so many hours working on the Bradleys that we hated them. There was no other way to look at the Bradleys than with disgust, except maybe after getting back to the patrol base alive after running over a landmine, which was the happiest day I ever had in Iraq. Surviving my first landmine explosion freed me from the expanding resentment that I had towards Cox, my gunner and teammate. Cox had an annoying habit

of smacking his food when he chewed. It was obnoxiously loud, and it was worse when he chewed gum. He had the worst leadership in our platoon: he stayed up late every night, he was impossible to wake up in the morning, he wasn't very smart, he used his rank to get out of details, and he took an additional, unapproved 2 weeks of R&R on leave. He was easy to hate. To be an effective team, the Bradley crew needs to work together. And we did not work well together.

As a mechanized infantry company, we used Bradley Fighting Vehicles as our primary mode of transportation. Sometimes we used HUMVEE's, which I distrusted after seeing the remains of a few of them after hitting roadside bombs. My Bradley faired pretty well with all the landmines and improvised explosive devices that I hit. I came home alive, so I guess the Bradley is a decent vehicle. HUMVEE's were another story; they could be vaporized. The Bradley is an armored personnel carrier that looks like a tank to the untrained eye, but it is meant to transport and insert dismount infantry troops into battle. The Bradley has a turret like a tank, but our guns are not as big as the Abram's tank, although the Bradley's 25 mm gun can kill Russian T-72 tanks as was proven during OIF I in 2003. The 25 mm shoots either Armor Piercing (AP) or High Explosive (HE) rounds. The Bradley turret also has a 7.62 machine gun and a TOW missile, but in 2005 we didn't fire many TOW missiles. There are also grenade launchers and other rifle mounts that we rarely used. We primarily shot 7.62 mm ammunition from the Bradley.

Part of our mission was to provide convoy security for the supply bitches, engineers, and anyone else who wanted to come into Samarra without Armor. So we were responsible for driving to the Tigris River to meet them and escort them into the

city. If Civil Affairs had to do some psy ops in the city, we had to escort their cherry asses. If Halliburton came to work on our generator that powered our patrol base, we had to go get their asses from the edge of the city because they dared not enter unescorted. If we got a freezer trailer full of ice, we had to go escort the truck. When some dumb-ass insurgent launched a mortar out of the back window of his piece of shit 1973 Datsun and it landed in Uvanni, we had to go chase his ghost. We never found him. And then we had our own internal bullshit missions that we were responsible for—route clearance, the task of driving the roads of Samarra at sunrise to try to find the bombs that were buried the night before, so that we could give the thumbs up that the city was safe for travel on the roads. I found one landmine that was buried on top of the road with dirt covering it. We would creep down the road at speed stop plus one mile per hour. It was frustrating to have to drive at stop speed while exhausted. All I wanted to do was get out of the Bradley and go home and say, "Fuck Iraq."

As the insurgents became more proficient with IED's, drivers were getting injured more than dismounts, which turned the convention Cold War paradigm upside down. We were learning to fight a war that we had not trained for. We watched the videos before we deployed of the vehicles that had been blown apart by roadside bombs hidden in everything from guard rails to under trash piles, so we deployed knowing that there could be an IED under every coke can in the road, but we didn't know that there wasn't ever a trash man in Iraq, so shit littered every street. Human waste was food for the goats, sheep, cats, dogs, and chickens that roamed everywhere.

The heat was unbearable and the driver's compartment turned into an oven with the engine running more than 12 hours per day. The Bradleys never fully

cooled down. They would get parked in the motor pool for a few hours, but we were up and down every few hours on a mission. The heat, maintenance, and unending mounted missions left me disillusioned as an infantryman. Most importantly, I was bitter that Baucom made me a driver as punishment for having a college degree. It was an embarrassment to exceed the qualifications for becoming a Commissioned Officer and to be sentenced to the Hell Hole.

Complacency

Complacency kills more soldiers than anything else. Complacency kills more than roadside bombs, rocket propelled grenades, landmines, Kalashnikov rifles, and suicide bombers combined. If a soldier takes his eye off the ball for one minute, a smart and resilient enemy, like the Islamic insurgents we fought in Iraq, will take advantage of that lapse of focus and use it to their advantage. It is the complacency that is more dangerous than any of the weapons because it eventually catches up with every soldier, like fate. It is not a matter of if a soldier will become complacent, but when. Every soldier on a twelve-month rotation will eventually make a mistake like set a pattern of behavior, like using the same route too many times. Only the lucky will live to tell about their mistakes.

Before we deployed, we were briefed about the importance of not being complacent, but we failed to keep that philosophy close to heart, and we paid a price. The briefing was in the gymnasium on Ft. Stewart. We sat in the bleachers and listened to the officer go through his PowerPoint presentation about the dangers that we would encounter on our upcoming deployment. The presentation focused on the insurgent's primary means of success—the roadside bomb, or Improvised Explosive Device (IED). We knew that we were deploying to Iraq, but we were not told any details about the sector we would be working in. The one thing we learned during that briefing was the insurgents were becoming highly effective with roadside bombs. The bombs were not only effective against HUMVEE's, they were also destroying Abram's Tanks and Bradleys. The image of the Abrams that was flipped over by a bomb silenced our entire Company. The turret was blown across the street from the hull of the tank. We knew the fate of the tankers that were operating that vehicle, and it hit us hard because if the

insurgents could do that to a 120,000 pound Abrams tank, then our 75,000 pound Bradleys were doomed as well. The impending dangers began to weigh heavy as the reality of our mission materialized.

We endured many briefings before we deployed to Iraq about bombs on the side of the road. We had dozens of Field Training Exercises where we trained with blank ammunition. We were more than adequately warned about the dangers of roadside bombs. We were warned that insurgents would hide roadside bombs under trash, so we went over to Iraq thinking that under every coke can there was a bomb. Unfortunately, Iraq does not have a waste disposal industry. They have goats, sheep, and stray dogs to dispose of all their trash that they throw to the curb of the street. The entire country is littered with trash, so we knew bombs could be anywhere. The immanent danger wore us down as our stress levels stayed high.

We also learned about how resilient and patient the insurgents were from the briefing. Insurgents in Iraq have the home field advantage of observation. They have the luxury of quietly watching American's patterns of behavior from the cafes, homes and shops that line the dusty streets of Samarra, and they can observe as easily if they were the Invisible Man. In fact, they were invisible; we could rarely see them unless they ran away or pulled out a weapon, which they rarely did. If they did run, it was usually out of fear rather than criminal intent. The insurgents have the luxury of looking like every other Iraqi. They dress the same. They speak the same—never English. And, unfortunately, they believe the same—that we want to make Iraq the 51st State.

The insurgents were able to patiently monitor our movements from the streets and through the windows of their homes. We won't ever know the exact amount of insurgents

that came into Samarra from foreign countries or the amount of homegrown resistance we encountered. That amount of cooperation from the citizens of Samarra was unthinkable during 2005. Things may be different now, but during OIF III it was us and them. When we could get locals to speak with us, they would speak only of petty inter-tribal feuds

During our deployment the monotony wore us down. Eventually we became resilient ourselves by using the same techniques ourselves the insurgents had used against us, but unfortunately, for the most part, our successes were precarious at best, or at least it felt that way. We began to watch the city of Samarra as the insurgents watched us. But it was like trying to monitor a galaxy with a monocle. PFC Rother was on an observation point on a rooftop when an insurgent dug a whole on Brown's Street and dropped a 155mm artillery round in the whole. As soon as the insurgents hands let go of the round, our little American friend—the 5.56mm round of rifle ammunition—penetrated the insurgent's skull while traveling at a speed over 3000 feet per second and splattered his brains all over the street. Rother dropped that son-of-a-bitch from about 300 meters away with his M-16 Rifle. It was a textbook touchdown. With our rules of engagement we had to see a weapon to kill, so catching a red-handed insurgent was an infantrymen's wet-dream, and we had it all: the hole in the ground, the artillery round, and the insurgent's brains splattered on the dusty asphalt—a picture-perfect open and close case. It was a touchdown that our whole task force celebrated. Painfully, successes like this were few and far between as we were able only to make marginal gains.

Unlike that day, most of our days were filled with monotony—the primary ingredient for complacency. Our days were filled with many hours of the same old grind:

mounted patrols in our Bradleys; escorting supply convoys, which wouldn't dare enter our sector without a Bradley escort; drop offs and pick ups (supply, personnel, medical evacuations); civil affairs missions; filling sandbags; pulling roof guard; route clearance; and my personal favorite—shit burning detail, having to burn the feces from all 300 men at Patrol Base Uvanni.

Monotony crept in silently, like cancer. We never knew we had it. It just showed up, and by then it was too late to care. We had grown accustomed to our presence patrols where we rode around the city of Samarra trying to protect our roads. We were tired of the primitive living conditions at Uvanni. The heat was unending. Even at night it was only down to the 90's. We couldn't wash the stink out of our clothes. The lack of running water and inability to take regular showers had left me with a rash on my ass, or "Monkey Butt" as we called it.

At Patrol Base Uvanni, we didn't have toilets that worked, so the engineers built outhouses made from plywood and 2x4's. There were 4 private stalls with wooden doors that wouldn't really close. The bench seat had a hole cut in it, and below the seat was a 55 gallon barrel that had been cut to fit through the rear trap door. Approximately 300 men shit in those stalls every day, so we had to burn the shit twice a day with diesel fuel until all the crap disappeared, which meant stirring the flaming shit pot while it burned until it all evaporated. I can still remember my first shit burning detail. Smitty and I were about to gag. I thought for sure Smitty was going to puke. I was having gag reflexes myself while Cox and Jones were laughing.

The shit burning detail was not the only detail that took time to become accustomed to. Learning to take a shit with a flak vest and helmet on was another matter.

You had to be at Uvanni as soon as the burning detail was over to minimize the flies from swarming on your ass as you tried to pull that brick of a shit from the Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) out of you ass. If you didn't have to shit just then when the shitters were clean, you were doomed to have a thousand flies on your ass while you took a dump later when the shit pans were full. MRE's must have some special constipation ingredient. Maybe it is to counter all those moments that literally scare the shit out of you during war. I was always on the lookout for vegetables that would help exonerate the bowels.

Maybe it was the routine bullshit, our fatigue, our egos, or our complacency that let us drive past the corner of 18th and Celtics one sad day without paying attention to a hole on the left side of the street littered with trash. This hole was big and obvious, but for some reason we didn't pay attention to it, and we drove past it several times as we circled our sector. The entire city of Samarra is covered in household trash. The trash cannot be characterized as litter either. It is simply all the household trash in the city is strewn across the streets. The city smelled like sewage, and our patrol base wasn't much better since we rarely had running water. The living conditions ate away at our discipline and motivation to keep our eye on the ball.

After being in Samarra for six months, we had our fair share of personal first hand experience with roadside bombs and landmines, so we couldn't give ourselves the excuse that we didn't know what an improvised explosive device looked like because we knew, and we should have spotted the one that took Tan's legs. The bombs scare the shit out of you. They are loud. The explosions are bright, and you can never tell you hit one until it is too late, so the best thing to do is haul ass through the kill zone like we were trained to do during our dozens of field training exercises. The kill zone is the immediate area

around the bomb explosion where insurgents can make a complex ambush; just like the intersection of 18th and Celtics in old town Samarra where Tan got hit. Old Town is near the Gold Dome Mosque, an ancient Muslim temple of historic significance that mysteriously blew up after our deployment in February 2006.

I'm sure the Americans or Shias were blamed for the mosque's demise. The Gold Dome Mosque probably blew up from the inside just like the Mosque on 30th and Celtics did—because the Sunnis were making bombs inside. I bet my left testicle they were making bombs inside. Unfortunately we were never able to enter mosques, so we could never search mosques.

While we were in Samarra, a mosque blew up. The explosion happened inside the mosque. The 30th and Celtics mosque bricks were strewn hundreds of meters away from the building after it blew up. I drove my Bradley right over the rubble that littered 30th street. We all knew that for bricks to project away from the building, it had to blow up inside, and, as expected, none of the locals knew how it happened. They never saw anything, or so they said. I took gratification when my Bradley crumbled the bricks lying in the street. The frustration from never being allowed to search a Mosque because we would offend the Muslims hampered our efforts to provide security to the city. We were constantly trying to find weapons but were only marginally successful in slowing the amount of violence. This was partially a result of not being able to search the dozens of mosques in Samarra. The marginal successes wore down our motivation. The monotony lead to carelessness and apathy.

We had the attitude that we could just go out into the city and put in our hours of presence patrols and come back to Uvanni to watch a DVD, send an email home, or talk

on the phone with our families, or hang out and fuck-off in whatever way we had grown accustomed to in our eighth month of the deployment. I preferred DVD's, but the guys had me hooked on the X-Box video game Need for Speed. We usually traveled with four Bradleys, but Lieutenant Hurley, Jones, and Kircher were on leave, so we only had three Brads on patrol that day. But the fact that they weren't driving with us that day is not sufficient alone to excuse our mistake. We had fallen victim to the most dangerous enemy of them all—complacency. August 6th felt like all the other days we had endured, but we took our eye off the ball. We were casually cruising through our sector. Nicholson was talking shit over the platoon radio like he always did.

"You know Bussard, these Iraqis have it right on one thing. A woman should be at home taking care of the kids. That's why we have so many problems back home like we do. It wasn't like that back when women stayed at home and took care of the family. Now we have kids running around with Rap music doing whatever the Hell they want," Nicholson said as we drove around the same pattern.

We were allowed to crack jokes and make small talk when the time permitted, but when the shit hit the fan, everyone buttoned up over the radio and we took care of business. Talking shit and cracking jokes was the easiest way for us to deal with all of the insanity of the mission.

August Sucked

August sucked. Monotony had fully set in and I just wanted to go home. We had been mortared every day for eight months. I didn't want to fight any more. Deep down I really wanted to fight, but had grown hopeless of the prospect of finding a red-handed insurgent. We had been chasing ghosts for 8 months and rarely ever saw the enemy. The insurgents could not fight a conventional war. But they were not a traditional enemy, and they used that to their advantage. August was the height of violence for our unit. We made more contact with the enemy than any other month to that point. I ran over more roadside bombs in August than the rest of the year combined. In the first three weeks of August, I hit eight roadside bombs. I hit a total of eleven roadside bombs in 2005. There were at least six more artillery rounds or landmines that I ran over that did not explode.

We ultimately had to employ the same resilience that the insurgents were successfully using against us. We planted men in observation points to over-watch the city. But that came after we learned some hard lessons. August 6th, we left Patrol Base Uvanni like we had so many other days: tired, bored, arrogant, numb, and unaware of the patterns we were setting during our patrols. We were in the throws of a full-blown disconnect between the dangerous reality of Samarra and the denial of complacency.

We had been patrolling Samarra for 8 months. We were exhausted. I had not taken leave. It was hot as fuck everyday. The Bradley engine compartment was an oven. The Bradley was loud. It was strong and tough, but what it made up in durability, it lost in silence. I know that we lost a lot of opportunities to catch bad guys due to the noise of the Bradley. They could hear us leave and hear us come back every time we rolled out,

which made it easy for them to run out to the street and bury a bomb just in time for us to return and hit it on the way back to Uvanni.

On August 6th, 2005, we left Uvanni like we had grown accustomed to too many times during the past 8 months of deployment. We were tired from the long days of work. The unending stream of bullshit missions, the ceaseless maintenance on the Bradleys, the details we had to pull to keep the shit-hole Uvanni standing like shit-burning detail, chow hall detail, roof guard, gate guards, and whatever else the first sergeant could pull out of his ass to keep us busy while he stayed in his room watching DVD's.

We all wanted to check out; whether via DVD's, iPod's, video games, internet, or talking on the phone to someone back home. We wanted to leave, with the exception of a couple of young bucks or career officers, whom I am now grateful for their professionalism. But the majority of us were ready to go home well before August. The stress of all the mortars, rockets, small arms fire, and roadside bombs kept increasing as the deployment wore on, so that when we rolled out on August 6th, we were numb to the inherent danger that we were facing. It is amazing that one can become desensitized to things like mortars falling out of the sky. Uvanni had become in a very real sense a Hollywood movie. The mortars fell and we could stand there without flinching. But we could not escape the impending stress that weighed on all of us and ultimately affected our ability to make good decisions and keep our heads in the fight.

Some of the guys were still suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from their first deployment to Iraq. So being back in the oven again was a new level of stress in an already intense situation for a lot of our unit. But we were infantry, so we never talked about things like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Cox was tweeking out on the gun

and would shoot at nothing if one of our tracks hit an IED. He would just start shooting. When Kircher was driving Lieutenant Hurley, they hit a buried bomb that blasted a hole in the ground about 10 feet before they ran over it. Hurley took a face full of dirt and sand. Their track was peppered but no damage to the Bradley or crew. But Cox fired off a few rounds of 25mm before we were able to get through the kill zone. Doobie was yelling, "Stop. What are you shooting at?" And Cox said, "Those motherfuckers are trying to kill us." So our track was definitely the quick gun in the platoon. We were not afraid to shoot, even if we didn't know what exactly we were shooting at. But we always were retaliating from an attack. And the attacks came with more and more frequency as the deployment wore on and on.

On August 6th, 2005 we had set a pattern of predictable behavior by driving around the "old town" area of Samarra between the Gold Dome Mosque and the Spiral Minaret. By "old town," I mean really old. There were apartments that were ancient caves in the city that were probably built at least 2000 years ago. The city of Samarra has ancient history. The "Old Town" looked like an Egyptian ruin. There were ancient languages etched in the side of the buildings exteriors. Some of the apartments looked like cave dwellings carved into the side of rock.

The intersection of 18th and Celtics was modernized even though it was in "Old Town," or modernized by Iraq standards, which means they had glass windows, but it smelled like Hell because they don't have a sewer system worth a shit. 18th and Celtics has a rotary traffic circle like many four way intersections in Samarra, but this one has six entry points to the traffic circle, so it was a little more complex than a standard four-way intersection. As a Bradley driver, I knew the city like the back of my hand by August. I

knew exactly which intersections I could take a 90-degree turn at full speed and which ones required braking. But on August 6th, 2005 we weren't traveling at full speed.

Just like all the other days, we dropped our dismount soldiers off in the city. The dismounts would go into someone's home and establish roof top security. Most of the time, the Iraqis would offer tea, but not very much intelligence or information about insurgent activity. The women would always leave the room where the men were with our soldiers. After we dropped the dismounts, the Bradley crews would either patrol by driving around or secure a perimeter by parking in strategic locations. August 6th we drove around and around the same old loop of our sector setting a pattern. We set a predictable pattern of behavior, and some patient insurgent sat invisibly and watched us drive around the intersection of 18th and Celtics until he knew exactly when to blow the IED, and he nailed it perfectly.

As we approached the intersection of 18th and Celtics for the sixth time that afternoon, the bomb exploded right next to the driver's hatch of Tan's Bradley. It was the biggest roadside bomb I had ever seen. It was estimated at 2 or 3 155 rounds with a penetrator that could penetrate several inches of steel with a razor sharp piece of metal about the size of a quarter. That penetrator ripped through the reactive armor, side skirts, wheels, hull of the Bradley, through both of Tan's legs, the engine compartment, and finally rested in the engine block of the 900 cubic inch Cummings turbo diesel engine block.

We will never know with 100% certainty who buried the IED that blew Tan's legs off, but after we searched that neighborhood, an old woman told our guys that we killed the boy that buried the bomb during the firefight that followed the complex ambush. An

Improvised Explosive Device alone can be an effective killer, but they are more effective when used in a complex ambush, which usually includes secondary bombs or rocket attacks. A complex ambush is effective when the first bomb or attack immobilizes a vehicle which forces the patrol to stop, and then a secondary wave of attacks can be launched when the patrol is most vulnerable, especially if the convoy suffered human casualties and immobilized vehicles. After a convoy is immobilized, the insurgents have the advantage to strike again with rockets, small arms fire from rifles, or additional improvised explosive devices.

Smitty, Birdsong, and Nicholson were on point. Brophy and Tan were in tow, and they were the only two in their track. Brophy and Tan had learned to operate without their Bradley Commander because Foreman was always at Uvanni watching DVD's instead of being a good leader and working with his crew. Cox, Dubiel, and I were pulling up the rear in the last Bradley. The dismounts were in a nearby house having tea with some of the locals while they were pulling over-watch from the house rooftop. We were just rolling through the city to have a presence of American might. I still can't figure out what the purpose was. We were just there—for what? To hold the city until some form of democracy could take hold? We rolled through the city. We set the pattern.

The insurgent waited patiently from a nearby window, sipping tea, probably sitting cross-legged in a man dress or chilling on a Persian rug, and then they blew the IED with a remote controlled device, probably a cell phone or a garage door opener. We had hit several roadside bombs before this one, but never one of this magnitude or precise location, with power, and skilled detonation. On more than one occasion we had seen bombs that we hit uploaded to the Internet within hours. The insurgents would videotape

the detonations for publicity. My Bradley had been peppered several times. Every time the bombs exploded, the chill would hit me; when would the real one come?

The bomb blew the Bradley's road wheels across the median to the other side of the street. I saw the whole thing as I was driving the 12 track 50 meters behind Tan. The bomb immobilized Tan's track. It was a mobility kill, and a huge victory for the insurgents. We lost communication with Tan. My heart raced. I was repeating, "Oh Fuck, Oh Fuck, Oh Fuck." It was the longest 10 seconds of my life. I knew the track was immobilized. Half the reactive armor, side skirts, shocks, and road wheels were strewn to the other side of the median as the bomb penetrated the Bradley's hull. The explosion crippled Tan's Bradley. The IED stopped Tan's Bradley dead in its tracks—a perfect mobility kill. The Bradley couldn't move. I knew it was bad. Tan didn't answer when we tried to call him on the radio.

I was driving my Bradley right behind Tan. I was too close. I knew we should have had 50 meters of spacing between our tracks, but I was right up behind him. Dubiel gave me the command to back up. I slammed the transmission in reverse and nailed it. We were backing up when another explosion rocked the back of my Bradley. We were in our first full on complex ambush with a secondary roadside bomb or rocket explosion that quickly escalated the situation to a complex attack against us. Cox started to light up the intersection with the 25mm main gun. The big gun ripped through nearby windows where we thought we were receiving contact from. The 25mm High Explosive rounds set the buildings fire. Cox lit it up. Later, the guys back at Uvanni would say it sounded like World War III during our contact with the enemy. Cox kept shooting. Dubiel was

freezing up and didn't know what to do. I was yelling, "I need to go help Tan. Cox! Shoot those motherfuckers."

I was in my boxer shorts and flip-flops when the IED went off. The heat had been so unbearable that there was nothing left to do but take of some clothes. I was supposed to be in full battle uniform plus my flak vest while driving the Bradley, but it was so hot, that as soon as I got in the Hell Hole, I started dropping layers. Drivers had become pros at ways to beat the heat. I just dropped all my clothes and drove the mission in underwear and flip-flops on occasion.

As soon as I knew Tan was fucked up. I started putting my clothes back on. I hated admitting defeat. I hated that damn flak-vest and full DCU uniform when driving. Drivers weren't the only ones either. The dismounts used to take their gym shorts when they would go on over-watch missions so they could ground their clothes and try to beat the heat. But whatever we did, it never worked. There is no escaping 125-degree heat. We tried everything, even drinking gallons of water and shipping in trucks of ice. But the heat was inescapable. We were left to deal with it in all its punishing misery. It was just one more source of unbearable frustration that weighed the moral down, as the mission never seemed to end.

Cox shouted, "I'm shooting. I'm gonna shoot those motherfuckers." And he did. Our track put some serious rounds down range. We kept the cover fire going while the dismounts were moving into position.

I was begging Dubiel to let me go help Tan because Brophy was all alone in the Bradley with Tan. Tan was unconscious and severely bleeding from his legs. I opened my driver's hatch and yelled at Dubiel to let me go help. He said, "No. Stay in the track."

Tan was out of communication, so we knew it wasn't good. Brophy was yelling over the radio, "Will somebody fucking help me. Goddamnit! I'm all alone over here."

The next minute was the longest minute of my life. Their track was immobilized, and Brophy didn't have contact with his driver. I was watching from my drivers compartment. There was nothing I could do, and all I wanted to do was jump out and help Brophy. SFC Foreman eventually showed up with the dismounts. They secured a perimeter and began to lay down a wall of small arms fire.

We pulled rear security. Cox kept shooting at everything that moved. My heart pounded as I watched the scene unfold. Nothing made sense. We were trained for these situations, but when the bomb goes off, it is another story about how to react in the heat of battle.

It sounded like every gun that was with us was going full throttle. Our Brad was leading the way. Cox kept shooting, and the evidence was immediately apparent that war had been unleashed upon this intersection. The High Explosive rounds that Cox was firing were setting cars on fire. A BMW 535 that was across the street caught fire in the engine compartment. The fire began to creep into the car's interior.

We couldn't reach Tan. Explosions were going off. We didn't know what the Hell was happening, except that we were being attacked. We cleared the entire intersection. All the civilians vanished immediately after the bomb exploded. They had seen enough explosions since 2003 to know when to take cover. The hail of gunfire left several cars on fire, downed power poles, set buildings on fire, blew out every window, and woke up everyone back at Uvanni. The guys on roof guard at Uvanni said it sounded like World War III going on, and it felt like it too. The dismounts were engaging everything they

could. Brophy single-handedly had to put tourniquets on both of Tan's legs. Smitty and Nicholson were on the net with company trying to arrange a med-evac. Cox, Dooby, and I kept moving our Bradley to let the guns roar.

A nearby truck was burning as it received several rounds of 25 mm high explosive ammunition rounds. As Cox kept firing, I kept yelling, "keep shooting. Put some fire on those windows up there. We have movement from that building." And that building took a lot of rounds. Cox shot through a metal power pole. The power pole fell onto the building and caught the building on fire. The BMW fire spread through the entire car. The interior was on fire and the glass blew out of all the windows and the flames enveloped the entire car. It was a surreal scene. As the car burned to the ground it became the symbol of my tour in Iraq—everything that was attractive and functional burned to the ground, including my spirit and several men. The war consumed things with an insatiable appetite for destruction.

As the firefight continued, seconds seemed like hours and minutes seemed like days. Time stood still, and we made mistakes as the pressure of the fight had caught us off guard again and the ability to make clear decisions evaporated. Everything was insane. The rounds of our 25 mm main gun set the tenor for the fight. The continual firing of the belt-fed machine guns from the dismounts echoed through the city. The echoes of the gunfire ricocheted not only through the intersection of 18th and Celtics, but through the entire city of Samarra. We were in the fight of our careers. The intersection was burning. Glass was blown out of many of the nearby shops. Ironically, the blast happened in front of the funeral home. Gelderloose went black on ammunition. He ran up to our

track on more than one occasion and asked Dubiel for more ammunition for the 240 Bravo machine gun.

The 240 Bravo fired around 600 rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition per minute. That is a lot of anger going down range. You don't want to be on the receiving end of that gun. Cox was going through his share of 7.62 as well as 25 mm ammunition. We were even more deadly since ours was turret mounted with a sight that could pick up heat signatures from 3000 meters away. You can run but you can't hide from the thermal heat sensors. Gelderloose gave them hell with the 240 Bravo machine gun. He put some rounds down range, as did everybody else that had a weapon. The burning vehicles were the only sign of Iraqi presence in the intersection. Our guns unleashed a hale of gunfire that woke the dead from the ancient ruins. Old town Samarra had pissed off the American beast.

Tan's status was unknown. Brophy was trying to get his medical pouch to rescue Tan from the driver's hatch. With all the chaos and confusion, Brophy was able to make it to the driver's hatch where he found Tan severely wounded from his injuries to his legs. Nicholson backed his Bradley up to Tan. Tan was loaded into the back of their track. Once Brophy pulled Tan from the driver's hatch, he applied two tourniquets to Tan's legs to stop the bleeding.

Smitty and Nicholson had called Company to send a Quick Response Force to back us up. It was headquarters. Captain Kramer, First Sergeant Hendrix, and Lieutenant Gus came with the mechanics. The mechanics brought the M 88 Tank to tow the immobilized Bradley back to Uvanni. Smitty and Nicholson drove Tan to Patrol Base Razor where a Blackhawk helicopter flew Tan to Forward Operating Base Speicher that

was in Tikrit about 50 miles north of Samarra where Tan would have one of his legs amputated before being flown to Germany where he endured another amputation.

Captain Kramer and First Sergeant Hendrix were surveying the damage as they walked around the intersection trying to gather intelligence. Hendrix was like a scared puppy dog. It was the first time we had seen him out of Uvanni in action in a long time. Our First Sergeant spent the majority of his time in his room watching DVD's that he borrowed from soldiers. He was a man of God, or so he claimed in services. In battle he was something else, but he wasn't a man of courage, that is for sure. I had no respect for him as I watched First Sergeant follow CPT Kramer around the scene of the crime. He was lost. He was not a leader. He was a follower.

Kramer, Hendrix, and the mechanics pulled up to tow the destroyed Bradley back to Uvanni. I watched Kramer and Hendrix take command of the situation, or really watched CPT Kramer take control of the situation. 1SG Hendrix wandered around following Kramer. 1SG looked scared to death. It was a scary scene. Smoke was everywhere from the fires. The 535 BMW had burned to the ground. It had burned in stages. First the engine caught fire, and then the dashboard, then the seats, then the tires, and finally the windows blew out. When we left, the Beamer was a smoldering frame and wheels with only metal remaining. We torched a few vehicles that day.

The mechanics hooked Tan's Bradley up to the M-88 tank and got it ready to tow back to Uvanni. They hit the street on full alert, as they had not been in any situation as intense as this to date. They had their weapons at the ready while they hooked up the track. The mechanics knew Tan as well as any of us because they had spent so much time pulling maintenance on the Brads with him.

But most importantly, we worked side by side with the mechanics late in the night many times as we needed to have our Bradleys ready for the next morning mission, so while the dismounts were fucking off, we were in the motor pool pulling maintenance on our tracks more often than not. The mechanics weren't infantry, but they kept us moving as best as they could. On more than one occasion, I had to go to the mechanic's room and wake Kuhn up. I said, "Kuhn. Wake up man. I need to pull the pack on the Bradley. We blew another oil line. My shit is dead."

The Bradleys had thresholds, and we pushed them past those thresholds every day. We drove the shit out of them. We made calls that prioritized the amount of maintenance we could put into the track, and on many days I chose to drive with fucked up track pads or broken shocks that put our mission at risk.

The thing that hurt the most about Tan getting hurt was that the insurgents had taken out the most dedicated driver. I could say, "Fuck it." Tan couldn't say, "Fuck it." I resented Tan because he would always do the right thing when I wanted to say, "Fuck it." But since we were a team, if Tan was out working on his track, I needed to be working on mine. So they got the best driver, and that was hard to swallow.

As the dismounts cleared the neighborhood, we pulled our track on point so we could cover the view of Celtics and the majority of the intersection. The fight destroyed many of the businesses and residences in the vicinity of the explosion. We took a toll on everything near our Bradley. The dismounts did the same thing on every angle at the intersection. We will never know the death toll of that day. But the hospital and the morgue took in some bodies, that much is certain. For days after August 6th, the city was at a standstill—no businesses opened for days after. Traffic was at a minimum the days

following. However, immediately after the fight there were a number of emergencies for the citizens of Samarra.

Cox was scanning everything in sight as we pulled point on the intersection. I heard the whine from the thermal sight. As it is focusing on targets while the turret spins, the thermal sight whines. The turret spins and it jerks as the gunner brings the barrel to a stop, and all of this can be heard over the engine running. I knew every sound the Bradley made: the latch locking sound the ramp makes as it is released, the spinning of the turret, the whining of the sight, the rev of the engine as the gas is floored, and the boom boom of the 25 mm main gun.

The woman with the white flag haunted me for days after the incident. We were looking East on Celtics towards Uvanni, and this old woman with bad skin, wrinkled and dry skin, came out to the intersection waving a white flag with blood on it. She had a stick that was old as Mohammed and had part of a white sheet attached to it. She was in shock. She came to the street crying and carrying a white flag. She wanted to take her injured family member across the street. I told Cox, "Keep the fucking barrel on that bitch. Don't let her go anywhere. Fuck her."

She pleaded. She was hysterical. The intersection was destroyed. Everything in the vicinity was broken or burning. Every car, every window, every business, and every building at the intersection of 13th and Celtics was forever changed as we laid a wall of gunfire through that section of Old Town. Every person that was near that intersection was guilty by association. Someone somewhere knew that that bomb was buried. They were all guilty by association. She may not have buried the bomb, but she paid the price. Someone she loved dearly was dying. Someone we loved, one of our brothers was dying

too, or so we thought. We kept our barrel on her. We didn't let her cross the street to take a wounded civilian a few short blocks to medical care.

The hospital was just a couple of blocks away from where she cried, from where she begged Allah to help. The hospital was in sight, but so far out of reach. In the fight it seemed right to punish her—fuck her. But that night, I could not get her face out of my mind. I couldn't shake the woman with the white flag. It took days for me to be able to go to sleep without looking at her face. The old woman haunted me. She dogged my thoughts as I tried to check out. I put on my iPod and tried to go to sleep, but to no avail. It was useless. All I could see was the old woman's face, her pleading tears, the ancient stick, the white cloth, and the smoke filled intersection that was littered with ammunition casings. She was hysterical. I couldn't stop thinking about her for days. She tormented me for days. I couldn't get her out of my memory as hard as I tried. She wouldn't leave. As Kramer and the dismounts searched the nearby buildings, the Quick Reaction Force couldn't find any guilty parties. Justice was not to be found on August 6th. The citizens weren't going to give up another Muslim to the American's, especially after the distrust of the American's second occupation of Samarra. Those who had helped the American's during the earlier phase of the war were either found out or given up. So we were left with a population that hated our guts, more than any foreign fighters that were using their city for a personal battleground. The locals of Samarra had far more in common with outside jihads than they did with Americans. So it was no surprise that we did not find the guilty parties for planting the IED. It was a solid victory for the insurgents. A Bradley kill was a huge impact for the guerilla insurgents. It sent a powerful signal back to the United States that the war was not going well.

Although there weren't many journalists that visited Samarra during 2005, if they did, they didn't stay long. And there weren't any that day fore sure. Lieutenant Gus was taking some serious pictures when he was following Kramer around the scene. But those photos never made the cover of any magazines. We had grown accustomed to not catching any bad guys. Frustration was the one word that summed up our deployment to Iraq, and we were obviously frustrated that day. Somewhere in one of those windows that we tried to shoot through, an insurgent was able to patiently and skillfully detonate a bomb and turn around and look like every other citizen of Samarra. It was impossible to tell who the enemies were unless they flat out pulled a weapon, which rarely happened, so we're left with the bitter reality of war—frustration.

The mechanics dragged Tan's Bradley back to Uvanni. The track was blown off on one side so the vehicle was dragged back on the road wheels without the track. They chained the long section of track pads to the back of the Bradley and dragged it back with the Bradley. The Bradley was peppered with holes in the reactive armor, road wheels, and hull. The holes were haunting. We previously had so much confidence in our Bradleys, but now the 75,000 pound vehicle was susceptible to improvised explosive devices. The HUMVEE's were getting fucked up all year, but now the Bradleys were getting killed, we were fucked. The game had changed for the worst, and being a driver felt like being issued a death sentence.

When the mechanics dragged Tan's immobilized Bradley back to Uvanni, we found the little piece of metal that ripped Tan's legs off in the engine block. It was about the size of a quarter. The driver's compartment was soaked in blood. The penetrator went through several inches of metal before it was stopped by the engine block.

We stripped the Bradley of all sensitive items (anything the Army required accounted for like weapons and radios). We removed all the ammunition and tools we could use on other Bradleys. The Bradley was going to the graveyard. Tan went to FOB Speicher, then to Germany, then to Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. to recover from having both his legs amputated. I saw him at Walter Reed in October 2005 when I went home for R&R. Tan was having ghost pains. He was still feeling pain in his missing limbs.

After we stripped the Bradley, we mounted up and rolled right back out into Samarra. The city was a ghost town. Not even a mouse stirred for days; no vehicles drove anywhere, no businesses opened, and no one walked the streets. The natives knew the shit hit the fan that day. Everyone for miles heard that firefight. They knew they had angered the giant, and they felt the wrath. I wanted to find a bad guy so bad. I just wanted to find those motherfuckers and kick the shit out of them, but they wouldn't put on a uniform and come out and fight like a real man with honor. I wouldn't either, if I was them. I was pissed off when we rolled out. But the terrible frustration of fighting a counter-insurgency set in again—the frustration of wanting to fight the invisible enemy but not being able to kill everyone since they all looked like the enemy.

One day at Uvanni, I was going to call my wife on the phone, and I saw Tan chilling, and I asked him what he was up to. He was sending his mother a check for $1000.00. I wasn't sending anywhere near that much to my mom. I sent some money to Mom, but I saved most of my Iraq money. Tan gave the majority of his to his mother who was working in a dry cleaner in Philadelphia, and I was earning much more than Tan because I was married, so I received Bachelor Assisted Housing (BAH), money every

month to pay the mortgage. Maybe that is why it hurt so bad when Tan got hurt—he is such a good guy.

When we deployed, I truly believed in our mission. I truly believed that I had joined a right cause, and that I was on the good guy team. We were going to help, only we didn't know that the people we were going to save didn't want any thing to do with us, so we were doomed from the get go, or so it felt. A bigger picture might have a sense of purpose that was worthwhile, but going through the day in and day out petty bullshit of exhausting, monotonous war sure didn't seem like the right thing to do any more in August.

When we returned to Uvanni after the firefight, all I wanted to do was check out. Every bone in my body said, "Time-out." But there was no "time-out" to be had. Instead, we had double time. We had to strip the Bradley of everything it had in it, and it was at full combat load. Beneath the floor boards of the Bradley are compartments that hold ammunition. All the ammo had to come out. All of our sensitive items had to be accounted for like the radios, GPS, 240 Golf, the driver's night sight, and even the wrenches Tan had used to perform maintenance with had to be accounted for. Going into the Bradley was like going into a casket. It was bloody. The Hell Hole was destroyed. The box that held the batteries had been blown out. The engine compartment cover was littered with holes. The floorboards and seat were covered in blood. It was a haunting experience getting all of our equipment out of the Bradley that was the fastest track in our platoon. Now it was going to the Bradley graveyard, never to see the streets of Samarra again.

We had seen carcasses of HUMVEEs, but now we were seeing Bradleys get destroyed, and that fact that nothing, not even the 75,000 pound Bradley, could save us from the insurgents anymore added to the already exhausting list of stressors that we all dealt with on a daily basis. The year was dragging on. The roster of Rest and Relaxation was set, and my crew was set to go home in October, if we could make it. We would make it of course, but we would endure many more months of bullshit before we could get a ride out of Hell.

Cleaning out Tan's Bradley was one of the worst details. It was the most personal detail that we had to deal with whenever we had to clean up after one of our guys was injured. We ahd cleaned Iraqi blood out of our Bradley, but this was different. Getting back to Uvanni on August 6th was on a different level of bullshit than we dealt with previously. It sucked because as soon as we got the track stripped we had to go back out and continue our patrols. Every fiber of my being resisted going back out to the city. All I wanted to do was time out and regroup. What the fuck just happened? How could we go right back out? Don't we get like a day off or something? No. We didn't get a day off. We rolled right back out, and we were charged with going back out without taking out our rage on the innocent civilians, if there really was such a thing in Samarra, which I highly doubted based on the fact of how much violence we saw in our sector in 2005. The citizens of Samarra loved to fight. And the hotter it got, the more they fought. It was the hottest, and we took the brunt of their retaliation during this period.

The city was eerily abandoned. Not a mouse stirred in the city. We did a few laps around the city. Brophy and SFC Foreman borrowed one of the HQ Bradleys. We didn't go out and rage against the civilians, which was exactly what I wanted to do. Every

one of us was ready to put our bare hands around the neck of the enemy, but they were not to be found. There we only civilians. We rarely found a guilty party, and that frustration kept compounding in the dissatisfaction of not killing bad guys. They deserved to die. They killed our guys, we should kill their bad guys, but we didn't get as lucky as I would have liked. And August 6th was the most dissatisfying day of combat—wanting to kill the bad guys so bad, but not being able to find him left me frustrated.

We came back after the last patrol of the day. The Battalion Chaplain had come to Uvanni for grief counseling. It didn't seem right that the guys from FOB Brassfield-Mora should be able to come into the den of inequity after being in paradise for eight months and tell us how we should grieve, which non of us listened to any way. The main thing we were told was not to lose our discipline and take it out on the innocent civilians. What kind of bullshit is that? After being mortared every day, there were no innocent people in Samarra. They all new someone, somewhere that had played a part in violence, therefore they had played a part in that violence too, or so I rationalized to myself, which was the biggest example of futility I've ever experienced.

All men in our platoon disregarded the resulting sermon from the Chaplain. None of us talked about it. We all stuffed every emotion as deep down as humanly possible to avoid feeling anything, because feelings were dangerous in combat. Feeling could get us killed. If I felt anything other than just get the job done no matter what, we could have just given up at that point and turned ourselves over to the insurgents and killed ourselves.

So we stood in Patrol Base Uvanni chow hall and listened to a well intentioned man give us sound advice that all of us disregarded as bullshit as we stuck our heads up

our asses and did what we had to do to service which was deny that anything had happened that hurt, which was an unspeakable lie, but that is how we got through it. No sermon from the Chaplain was going to make it any better.

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